

Our Hayes expedition had an interesting start. The day before our departure, we got word that Joel and Andy had set off their military emergency locator beacon from 11,000 feet on the East Ridge -- the same route we were planning to climb. Thinking the worst, I had assumed an injury or death had occurred and that Jon and I may be involved somehow with a rescue operation. This is not a good mindset in which to head off into the hills, yet we still intended to meet Rob Wing the next morning at his hangar at Chena Marina and just play it all by ear. We asked Rob to inform his military and other rescue contacts that we were willing and able to help with a rescue in any way we could.

The previous night, however, we were relieved to find out there were no injuries and that the rescue had been called for because of high winds and an unplanned night in a snow cave without bivy gear. Our mission was to climb the mountain, then remove their high camp and base camp from the peak and get all the gear home in one piece. The forecast called for 2-3 days of decent weather, followed by a pretty bad forecast as far as we could see after that.

We met Rob in the AM and were in the air by 9:30. Jon headed south by car to Delta Junction with directions to the airstrip. Ninety minutes later I was standing solo on the Trident Glacier underneath the huge East Face in warm and sunny weather. Rob then took off back to Delta to grab Jon and finish off the shuttle. By the time Jon landed, winds were increasing and we could already see plumes forming on every ridge in sight. We re-packed our kit super fast, laid a cache where the plane dropped us off and immediately starting skinning towards the ramp that leads to Levi's Bump (high camp) at about 3:00 pm, wading the route for a likely reversal in zero-vis. On the way up we came across their base camp, which seemed secure from winds, grabbed the satellite phone inside and kept on skinning. Conditions on the glacier were decent -- some powder and some styrofoam snow.

The ramp to Levi's bump is mellow until the last 300-400 vertical, where the angle kicks back and there is some mixed rock. Nothing required a rope -- but just a bit of extra attention as conditions on the ramp were primarily a very hard snow with ice in some places. This puts you directly on top of the bump. If you have enough time, you could continue down to the saddle or even up to about 11,000 or so on the ridge, where there is a flat area (though you may have issues digging in with such hard snow). We chose to stop right on top because it's not like the winds are going to be any higher there than anywhere else, plus it's a sweet view and vantage point. So as the sun was fading, we got to work on a nice tent platform and snow block walls. Winds by then were holding steady at about 25 mph with an occasional strong gust. Skies were clear.

By midnight, winds were up to 50 mph and gusting higher. By 2 am, winds were probably hitting 75 mph and really started throwing the tent around. That's when the snow walls blew over. We immediately got up and went out to repair the damage before anything worse happened. It took about an hour to repair the block walls but I still didn't trust them, so we decided the only way to hang in there was to start digging a cave. We worked through the night in atrocious conditions. The wind was carrying a sand-grit like snow and blasting our faces with the gusts. Many times we had to drop to our knees to avoid getting thrown down or blown off the other side of the mountain. Just another day on Hayes I guess...

By mid morning the next day, winds were still raging with gusts to 75. We moved everything into the snow cave and took the tent down and slept a bunch -- noting the one foot of snow on the north side of our cave that separated Jon from 4,000 of air (thin enough to let light in). So this was supposed to be the "good" weather we came for? Plumes blew off the summit at least a thousand feet higher than the mountain, and beautiful lenticular clouds formed all over the range. That night the northern lights came out and put on a nice show for us to make up for the heinous winds. We retreated into the cave for the second night on Levi's Bump and hoped the weather would be decent for a summit push. The winds were still in full force at midnight and gave us little hope for a summit push the next day. That is when I noticed a scratchy feeling in my throat -- the type you get when strep throat sets in (Jon was just getting over a wicked illness).

I crawled out of the cave at 7 am the next day and while the winds had calmed, the visibility was in question, with a lenticular forming over the plateau between the north and south summits and mixed visibility everywhere around us. But we packed up anyway and armed with 50 remaining wands, we

figured getting lost would not be a problem. One issue was that my health was gone, my throat was inflamed and I could hardly speak. The flu was setting in quickly and my energy level was already compromised and only getting worse, so Jon offered to break trail. Great time to go climbing!

We hardly considered it an honest summit attempt – more just something to do for the day, as we figured once the weather got better we'd make a "real" attempt. At 10:30 we dropped directly off the west side of Levi's Bump. The farther we got away from camp, the better the weather got, and we figured we might just get it. After all, it's only a bit more than 4,000 feet. We initially thought it wouldn't take much longer than 10 or 11 hours camp to camp and we easily had enough daylight to make it happen – theoretically.

The climbing was great and varied from 30 to 65 degrees with a few very short sections for which two tools are almost a necessity. Avalanche danger was not a real concern as the route was mostly sn'ice and very hard snow, with a few short sections of powder trail breaking on the lee side of seracs (those could conceivably be slide-prone in other conditions). The East Ridge is a huge ridge and more complex than it looks from below. It is wise to have a lot of pickets and a handful of screws. I'd say about half the route presents death fall potential in the conditions we experienced it, so running belays are key. In just the right, softer, conditions however, it may feel much more casual. There are a lot of crevasses that you must cross. We had a few legs-into-blackness experiences but nothing too serious.

By 5 pm we were gaining on the summit but also realized that it would take at least half as long to downclimb as it would to ascend. I know I underestimated the amount of the ridge that required running belays and good concentration – the type of terrain you don't want to reverse at night, especially with all the crevasses. By 6pm we were about 400-500 feet short of the top yet the pace was much slower, the snow had gotten much softer, and I was weakened from the illness. We figured we could have made it, but we wouldn't have summited until at least 7:15 pm, and by the time we rehydrated, shot summit photos and ate something, it would be pushing 7:30, maybe even 8pm. By the time we would have descended back to where we decided to turn around, it would have been almost dark, leaving 3500 feet of technical downclimbing to do without being able to see your partner or the rope beyond your immediate surrounding. Not a good idea. The thought of Joel and Andy's rescue just a few days before also didn't exactly calm our nerves.

We descended using running belays and, in general, kept one picket between us. When our 5 pickets ran out, Jon sent them back down to me on the rope and we kept going. We downclimbed without stopping for 3.5 hours before we got to a flat enough spot to take a decent rest. The bulk of it was face-in downclimbing with a hand on the head of each tool and picks planted well in the sn'ice. Crevasses had to be negotiated very carefully. Just after our rest it was dark, yet there were only a few hundred feet of technical terrain left before being able to walk down to the saddle, so it was all good. Once at the saddle, you still have 200-300 feet of steep climbing to get back on top of Levi's bump. We rolled into our snow cave at 11:30 pm. The walk along the saddle in the starlight and swinging tools back up to Levi's Bump was one of the coolest experiences of the trip for me. Certainly surreal to be in action at night on a peak like that with no one else in sight.

We slept in the next morning and I was beyond sick at that point. Our weather window was long gone and another summit attempt was out of the question. Winds were picking up and visibility was gone by 10 am. By noon, when we were packing up outside the snow cave, the weather was already severe enough to justify packing even faster and GET THE HELL OUT OF HERE!! Jon headed down to Joel and Andy's former bivy platform a few hundred yards away -- which was in a pretty dicey location above a very steep drop -- and dug up all the stuff sacks that had made up their camp cache. We divided up their load between us and headed down Levi's bump with shit strapped all over the place, and tethered sacks that I dragged down the mountain. We were probably handling 80 pound loads at that point.

After some very careful downclimbing with loads like that, we ended up on the gradual slope that heads down to the base of the ramp where our skis were cached. By then the winds were back up to 70+ mph and pushing us over constantly. The size of the packs didn't help and they acted like little parachutes. A few times the wind knocked me clear onto my ass. Same with Jon. By the time we hit the bottom of the ramp, I started looking around for Joel and Andy's skis, which I found under a rock. We then roped up, lashed together their skis, and dragged them behind us on a long cord while we carried our own skis and

poles in our arms. Between Jon and me we manhailed 4 sleeping bags, 2 tents, 4 pairs of AT skis, two cooksets and fuel, 8 sleeping pads, and all the other stuff needed for two separate camps. What fun! On the way down to base camp the winds got even stronger, and Jon and I both took a number of spills. The conditions had turned to ice and slopes were riddled with little chunks of rock, because apparently the winds had been so strong it had began to blow rock chips away from the mountain's outcroppings. Our wands were quite helpful for navigation.

When we got to base camp we spent an hour digging their tent out and instantly occupied it. The weather stayed terrible for 2 days, and when it cleared a bit we hauled a load of Joel and Andy's gear down to the landing site and called Rob for a pickup, reporting some blue skies. He mobilized the plane and made it all the way to the range before getting sideswiped by a gust of wind strong enough to instantly turn him back to Fairbanks. We returned to the base camp tent to be bored, sick, and anxious to leave. No way was skiing out going to be a possibility with my health and repeated episodes of 75 mph winds and a forecast of more of the same.

Two days later we had no wind, but questionable visibility, so we called Rob in to see if he could pull it off. Feeling optimistic this time, within 40 minutes of lying around in sleeping bags, we had taken down base camp and hauled it down to the landing strip. We marked out a runway with skis and poles and he arrived two hours later in less-than perfect flying weather. Two shuttles later Jon and I were in Delta Junction at my car, and the bulk of the gear payload ended up in Healy for us to pick up the following morning. Super Cub logistics are pretty interesting but I like it! Rob is seriously awesome and knows the range very well, so fly with no one else!

All things considered, it was an adventure to remember, but probably worth waiting for a good weather window – like the ONE THAT OCCUPIED THE ENTIRE MONTH BEFORE WE WENT THERE!!! ARGGHHH!!!! Go with a solid forecast and I'd recommend at least 16 hours to summit from Levi's bump – maybe more in more powdery conditions or with a slower party that likes to use more protection. Take about 65 wands and USE REFLECTIVE TAPE on them so you can see them with your headlamp spot light. Obviously, stay off the entire route if it's been snowing heavily and the winds haven't had a chance to blow it all off yet. We got 1.5 feet of snow at one point that appeared to load Levi's ramp, but the winds blew it all off within 12 hours. I'd plan on digging snow caves regardless of the forecast but having a tent may be good too. The winds easily compared to the worst days I've seen on Denali and Aconcagua but you won't have the luxury of occupying formerly-fortified camps. The ski out looks challenging but doable and I would have been stoked to do it under better circumstances.

I hope this helps if anyone is planning to go. I'd like to go back next year and do try a different route, perhaps the north ridge, an attempt from the Turkey Glacier side, or a route on the right side of the East Face – not sure if anyone's tried that but I saw many options for lines free of objective hazards. That would be better in May when darkness isn't a problem and it could go in a long push with some decent rests. I'm the type of character who really needs to stand on top of a project and Hayes is now a project!!